

STENDHAL MARIE-HENRI BEYLE
Vittoria Accoramboni - the Duchess of Bracciano

I

Unfortunately for me, as for the reader, this is not a work of fiction but a faithful translation of a sombre record set down in Padua in December 1585.

A few years ago I was in Mantua on the lookout for sketches and small pictures within my means, but I wanted paintings that dated from before 1600. It was about then that originality in Italian art, on the wane since the sacking of Florence, in 1530, finally petered out.

An extremely rich, miserly old aristocrat offered to sell me for a considerable price not pictures but some old manuscripts yellowed with age. I asked if I might look them over. He agreed, adding that he was relying on my honesty if I did not buy the manuscripts not to remember any of the spicy stories I might read in them.

On this understanding, which appealed to me – but to the great detriment of my eyes – I made my way through three or four hundred volumes in which, two or three centuries earlier, accounts of tragic events, challenges to duels, peace treaties between neighbouring noble families, and memoirs on every kind of subject had been hoarded. The elderly owner was asking a high price for the lot. After a good deal of negotiation I contrived to buy at some cost the right to make copies of certain short tales that I liked and that illustrate Italian customs going back to the year 1500. I have twenty-two folio volumes of them, and it is one of these faithfully translated stories that I now offer to the reader – that is, if he is gifted with patience. I am familiar with sixteenth-century Italian history and I believe that what follows is perfectly true. I have taken care that the translation of this old Italian style, which is serious, direct, sinister, and full of allusions to events and ideas which preoccupied the world during the reign of Sixtus V (1585), should contain no resonances of modern writing nor any ideas from our own unprejudiced century.

The anonymous author of this manuscript is a cautious individual; he offers no opinions nor does he rearrange facts in any way. His sole concern is to tell the story accurately. If he is sometimes unwittingly graphic it is because, in 1585, vanity did not surround every act with a halo of affectation. It was believed that one person could only influence another by explaining himself as clearly as possible. With the exception of courtiers and poets, no one in 1585 would have said, ‘I will die at Your Majesty’s feet’, when he had just sent for post horses to make his escape. This particular form of treachery was not yet invented. People then spoke little, and each paid great attention to what was said to him.

Therefore, kind reader, do not search in these pages for a striking style, shimmering with fresh allusions to fashionable modes of thought. Above all, do not expect the cloying emotions of a George Sand novel. That great writer would have created a masterpiece out of the life and misfortunes of Vittoria Accoramboni. The version I present to you can only make the more modest claims of history. When, by chance, in haste alone, at nightfall, our thoughts turn to the great art of understanding the human heart, we might well heed the historical incidents related here. The author reports everything, explains everything, leaves nothing to the reader’s imagination. He was writing twelve days after the heroine’s death.

II

Vittoria Accoramboni was born to one of the noblest of families in a little town called Gubbio, in the Duchy of Urbino. Since childhood she had been noted for her arresting beauty. But beauty was the least of her charms. She lacked no quality among those which inspire admiration in a girl of high birth. But there was nothing, you might say, so particularly remarkable about her, nothing which stood out among her exceptional qualities so much as a certain enchanting grace, which captured the hearts and good will of everyone. This candour, which endowed her slightest utterance with authority, was unmarred by the least trace of artifice. Had you no more than set eyes on her it would have taken all your strength to resist her charms. But once you heard her speak, especially if you held a conversation with her, it was quite impossible to escape her extraordinary allure.

Many of the young noblemen in Rome, where her father lived and where his palazzo still stands in the Piazza Rusticucci, near St Peter's, aspired to her hand. There was much jealousy and plenty of rivalry, but eventually Vittoria's parents chose Felice Peretti, a nephew of Cardinal Montalto, who by God's grace now reigns as Pope Sixtus V.

The son of Camilla Peretti, the cardinal's sister, Felice's original name was Francesco Mignucci. He took the name Felice Peretti when his uncle formally adopted him.

Vittoria's natural superiority, which could be called disastrous and which she unwittingly exuded wherever she went, accompanied her when she entered the Peretti household. Her husband's love for her fell little short of madness. Her mother-in-law Camilla and Cardinal Montalto himself seemed to have no other occupation than to discover and satisfy Vittoria's least wish. All Rome watched with fascination to see how the cardinal, who was as well known for his scant means as for his horror of all forms of extravagance, found unending pleasure in anticipating Vittoria's every wish. Young, beautiful, adored by all, she was often prey to costly fancies. From her new parents Vittoria received the most expensive jewellery, pearls, and in due course whatever seemed rarest at the Roman goldsmiths, so sumptuously stocked in those days.

For love of this dear niece, Cardinal Montalto, despite his famed harshness, treated Vittoria's brothers as if they had been his own nephews. At his intercession, Ottavio Accoramboni, then scarcely thirty years old, was nominated Bishop of Fossombrone by the Duke of Urbino and thus appointed by Pope Gregory XIII. Marcello Accoramboni, a young man of fierce courage, accused of several crimes and hotly pursued by the Roman police, had with considerable difficulty evaded the pursuit which could have led to his death. Under the cardinal's protection, he was able to enjoy a certain respite.

Vittoria's third brother, Giulio Accoramboni – as soon as Cardinal Montalto made the request – was admitted by Cardinal Alessandro Sforza to the highest honours at his court.

In a word, if people could only measure happiness not by the endless insatiability of their desires but by the real enjoyment of advantages they already possess, Vittoria's marriage to Cardinal Montalto's nephew would have seemed to the Accoramboni the crowning happiness of life. But the senseless craving for vast but uncertain profit can drive those human beings most endowed with fortune's favours into strange and perilous undertakings.

Indeed, if some of Vittoria's relatives – as many people in Rome suspected – helped to part her from her husband through their longing to amass a huge fortune, one might contend that they would have been wiser to have satisfied themselves with the modest advantages of a comfortable sum of money, which undoubtedly would soon have reached the pinnacle of all that ambition could desire.

While Vittoria was living in this way, a queen in her home, one night after Felice Peretti and his wife had retired to bed, a letter was given to him by a certain Caterina, Vittoria's Bologna-born maid. The letter had been delivered by one of Caterina's brothers, Domenico d'Aquaviva, nicknamed Mancino, for he was left-handed. This man had been banished from Rome for several crimes, but at Caterina's intercession Felice had obtained for him his uncle the cardinal's powerful protection. Mancino often came to Felice's house, for Felice trusted him implicitly.

The letter we are referring to was signed by Marcello Accoramboni, who of all Vittoria's brothers was the dearest to her husband. Most of the time Marcello lived in hiding outside Rome, but occasionally he risked entering the city, where he took refuge in Felice's house.

In the letter, delivered at such an unusually late hour, Marcello called on his brother-in-law for help. He begged Felice to come to his aid on a matter of the most pressing urgency, adding that he would wait near the Palazzo Montecavallo.

Felice showed his wife this strange letter, then he dressed and armed himself only with his rapier. Accompanied by a single servant, who carried a lighted torch, he was about to leave when his way was barred by his mother Camilla and all the women in the household, including Vittoria herself. They implored him not to go out at this late hour. As he paid no heed to their entreaties, they fell to their knees and with tears in their eyes begged him to listen to them.

These women, and particularly Camilla, had been horror-struck by the account of strange events which were happening daily and which went unpunished during the reign of Gregory XIII, a period beset by troubles and appalling crimes. One further fact struck them. When Marcello Accoramboni took the risk of coming to Rome, he never summoned Felice in this way, and such a step at this time of night seemed to them wholly unreasonable.

Primed with the heat of youth, Felice set no store by reasoning based on fear, and when he found out that the letter had been brought by Mancino, a man of whom he was extremely fond and to whom he had rendered services, nothing would stop him from leaving the house.

As we have said, a single servant went before him carrying a lighted brand, but poor young Felice had hardly taken a few steps up the slope of Montecavallo when he was felled by three shots from an arquebus. The murderers, seeing him on the ground, threw themselves on him and stabbed him repeatedly, until they were satisfied he was dead. This fateful news was at once carried to Felice's mother and wife and by them to his uncle the cardinal.

Without change of expression, without betraying his feelings in any degree, the cardinal quickly dressed and commended to God both his soul and that of the poor young man so unexpectedly taken. He then went to his niece's apartments, where, with admirable gravity and an air of deep serenity, he put a stop to the weeping and lamentation of the women, which had begun to resound through the house. Such was his authority over the women that from that moment, even when the corpse was carried out of the house, nothing was seen nor heard from any of them that diverged in the slightest from the behaviour of the best-regulated families at the most widely expected death. As for Cardinal Montalto, no one could catch a glimpse in him of even the mildest sign of ordinary grief. Nothing changed in the disposition or the outward appearance of his life. Rome, which with its usual curiosity watched every action performed by this deeply injured man, was soon baffled.

By chance the consistory was convoked at the Vatican on the day after Felice's violent death. Everyone in the city assumed that on the first day at least Cardinal Montalto would avoid this public function. There he would have to appear before a horde of inquisitive onlookers. They would note any sign of that natural weakness so essential for an eminent person to hide when he aspires to even greater eminence. For everyone knows that it is inappropriate for someone who hopes to raise himself above all others to show that he is the same as them.

But those who thought this way were doubly mistaken for, to begin with, as was his wont, Cardinal Montalto was among the first to enter the consistorial chamber, and, secondly, not even the most observant could detect in him any sign whatever of human emotion. On the contrary, by his response to those of his colleagues who, after such a brutal event, offered words of consolation he managed to confound everyone. His steadfastness and apparent rigidity in the face of such appalling misfortune at once became the talk of the town.

It is quite true that certain members of the consistory who were more experienced in court behaviour attributed this apparent coldness not to lack of feeling but to considerable dissimulation. This view was soon shared by most of the courtiers, for it was important not to seem too deeply wounded by a crime whose author was powerful and who might later block one's path to the highest office.

Whatever the reason for this seeming callousness, one thing is certain. Rome and the whole Papal Court were struck dumb. As for the consistory, after the cardinals had assembled, when the pope himself came into the chamber he instantly turned to Cardinal Montalto, and His Holiness's eyes filled with tears. But the cardinal's features did not stray from their usual impassivity.

The astonishment increased when Cardinal Montalto took his turn to kneel before His Holiness to give an account of matters in his care, and the pope, before allowing him to begin, could not hold back a sob. When His Holiness was able to speak, he tried to console the cardinal, promising him that instant justice would be meted out for such a fearful crime. But the cardinal, having humbly thanked His Holiness, begged him not to open an investigation into what had happened, protesting that he himself with all his heart forgave the perpetrator, whoever he might be. After this brief plea, the cardinal passed on to an account of normal business as if nothing unusual had taken place.

The gaze of every cardinal present was riveted on the pope and Montalto, and, although it is difficult to pull the wool over the experienced eyes of the court, no one dared say that Montalto's face betrayed the slightest emotion on seeing close up His Holiness reduced to tears. Cardinal Montalto's astonishing impassivity did not relax at all during the whole time that he worked with His Holiness. It was so noticeable that the pope himself was struck by it, and when the consistory had convened he could not help remarking to Cardinal San Sisto, his favourite nephew, '*Veramente, costui è un gran frate!*' In truth, this man is an arrogant friar.¹

Cardinal Montalto's behaviour did not change in any way over the following days. As was the custom, he received consolatory visits from cardinals, prelates, and Roman princes, but, however close his friendship with any of them, to none did he allow himself to utter a single word of grief or mourning. With everyone, after a short discussion on the unpredictability of human affairs, bolstered and corroborated by quotations from the Holy Scriptures or early Fathers, he instantly changed the subject and brought the conversation round to local news or personal matters concerning whomever he was with, just as if he wished to console his comforters.

Rome was especially interested in what would transpire at the visit that Prince Paolo Giordano Orsini, Duke of Bracciano, had been ordered to make, for gossip held him responsible for Felice Peretti's death. The common folk did not believe that Cardinal Montalto could find himself in intimate conversation with the prince without revealing some sign of his feelings.

When the prince arrived there was a huge crowd in the road outside the cardinal's door. Everyone was so eager to study the faces of the two speakers that the whole palazzo brimmed with courtiers. But no one saw anything unusual in either the one or the other. Cardinal Montalto behaved exactly according to court propriety. His face took on a noticeably jovial expression, and he spoke to the prince in an extremely affable manner.

A moment later, climbing back into his carriage and finding himself alone with courtiers who were his close friends, Prince Paolo blurted out with a laugh, '*In fatto, è vero che costui è un gran frate!*' By Jove, this man is in indeed an arrogant friar! It was as if he wished to confirm the truth of what the pope had let slip a few days earlier.

Wise heads considered that the conduct Cardinal Montalto had displayed cleared his way to the throne, for many shared his view that neither by nature or by force could he or would he harm whoever had committed the crime, although he had great reason to be distressed.

Felice Peretti had left nothing in writing concerning his wife. Consequently, she had to return to her parents. Before her departure, Cardinal Montalto gave her all the clothes, jewels, and in sum all the gifts she had received as his nephew's wife.

On the third day after Felice Peretti's death, Vittoria, together with her mother, installed herself in Prince Orsini's palazzo. It was said by some that the women were driven to this step by fear for their personal safety. The Curia appeared to threaten them with the accusation of being accessories to the murder – or at least with having had prior knowledge of it. Others thought (and what happened later seemed to bear this out) that they were led to this measure in order to bring about a marriage, since the prince had promised to marry Vittoria as soon as she no longer had a husband.

Nevertheless, neither then nor later was anyone sure who was responsible for Felice's death, although everyone suspected everyone else. Most, however, blamed Prince Orsini. It was widely known that he had been in love with Vittoria. He had given unmistakable indications, and the marriage which came about was clear proof, for the woman was of such inferior social standing that only the tyranny of passion could elevate her to matrimonial equality. The common people were in no way dissuaded from this view by a letter sent to the governor of Rome only a few days afterwards. It was signed by Cesare Palantieri, a young man of stormy character who had been banished from the city.

In his letter Palantieri said that there was no need for His Most Illustrious Excellency to trouble himself with looking elsewhere for the author of Felice Peretti's death, because he himself had had him killed following a disagreement that had taken place between them

some time before.

Few believed that the murder could have been committed without the consent of the Accoramboni family. They blamed Vittoria's brothers, who had been drawn by ambition into an alliance with a rich and powerful prince. Marcello, in particular, was accused on account of the letter that had prompted the unfortunate Felice to leave his home. Vittoria herself was maligned when they saw her so soon after her husband's death agreeing to live in the Palazzo Orsini as a future wife. People claimed that it was hardly likely that a man would be able to use small arms in the wink of an eye if he had been handling long-range weapons for some time.

On the orders of Gregory XIII, the murder investigation was undertaken by Monsignor Portici, the governor of Rome. The only evidence was that of Domenico, nicknamed Mancino, arrested by the Curia, who confessed without being put to the torture on 24 February 1582 during his second interrogation, that 'Vittoria's mother was the cause of it all, and she was aided and abetted by the maidservant from Bologna, who, immediately after the murder, took refuge in the fortress of Bracciano, belonging to Prince Orsini, and where the *corte* dared not enter; and that the assassins were Marchione di Gubbio and Paolo Barca da Bracciano, tried and trusty knights of a lord whose name, for valid reasons, could not be revealed.'

In my view, these valid reasons supplemented the earnest request of Cardinal Montalto, who was insistent that investigations should be taken no further and that, in sum, there should be no question of a trial. Mancino was released from prison and formally warned under pain of death to return directly to his country and never to leave it without express permission. He was freed on Santa Lucia's day in 1583, and the fact that this was also Cardinal Montalto's birthday more and more confirms my belief that it was at his request the matter was closed. Under a government as weak as that of Gregory XIII, such a trial could have had most disagreeable consequences to no purpose at all.

The activities of the Curia thus came to an end, but Pope Gregory XIII had no intention of agreeing to a marriage between Prince Paolo Orsini, Duke of Bracciano, and the widow Accoramboni. Having condemned the latter to a sort of prison sentence, His Holiness issued a warning to the prince and the widow not to arrange a marriage contract without his express permission or that of his successors.

When Gregory XIII died at the beginning of 1585 and the lawyers consulted by Prince Paolo Orsini concluded that the pope's warning was nullified by the death of the person who had imposed it, the prince resolved to marry Vittoria before a new pope was elected. But the marriage could not take place as early as the prince wished, partly because he wanted the consent of Vittoria's brothers – and it so happened that Ottavio Accoramboni, Bishop of Fossombrone, refused ever to give his – and partly because nobody believed that the election of Gregory XIII's successor would occur immediately. The fact is that the wedding took place on the very day that Cardinal Montalto, who was so closely concerned in the matter, was made pope – that is, on 24 April 1585. Either this was sheer coincidence or the prince was determined to show that he did not fear the Curia under the new pope any more than he had done under Gregory XIII.

The marriage deeply offended Sixtus V, for this was the name chosen by Cardinal Montalto. He had already abandoned the kind of thinking appropriate to a monk and had raised his soul to the heights of the position to which God had just elevated him.

The pope, however, showed no sign of anger. But as Prince Orsini presented himself that very day along with the mass of Roman lords to kiss the pope's foot (his secret aim was to try to determine from the Holy Father's expression what to expect or fear from this man, who until now was so little known), he realized that the time for levity was over. The new pope regarded him with a strange expression and, as His Holiness made no reply to the compliment addressed him by the prince, Orsini resolved to find out there and then the pope's intentions regarding him.

Through Ferdinando, Cardinal de' Medici – the brother of the prince's first wife – and also through the Catholic ambassador, Orsini requested and obtained an audience with the pope in his chambers. There, in a prepared speech, he addressed His Holiness, and, making no mention of the past, he rejoiced with the pope on the occasion of his new office and pledged him, as faithful vassal and servant, all his property and all his strength.

The pope listened carefully, and, when the prince had finished, replied that no one desired more than he that the life and deeds of Paolo Giordano Orsini should in the future be worthy of the Orsini blood and of a true Christian knight; that, as for his conduct in the past towards the Holy See and towards the person of the pope himself, no one would be better able to address him on this than his own conscience; that, meanwhile, the prince should understand one thing, which was that although His Holiness willingly forgave Orsini for what he might have done against Felice Peretti and against Felice Cardinal Montalto, he would never forgive what in the future he might do against Pope Sixtus; that, consequently, the pope would prevail upon him to go at once and expel from his household and from his estates all the brigands and criminals to whom, at present, he was giving refuge.

Sixtus V was always remarkably effective in whatever tone of voice he adopted, but when he was angered and threatening it could be said that lightning flashed from his eyes. What is certain is that Prince Paolo Orsini, who was accustomed to holding popes in awe, was forced by the pope's manner of speaking to think more seriously about his affairs than he had done in the past thirteen years. Accordingly, as soon as he left His Holiness's palazzo, he rushed to Cardinal de' Medici to tell him what had just taken place. On the cardinal's advice, the prince resolved to banish immediately all those outlaws whom he was harbouring in his palazzo and estates, and he made haste to think up a reasonable pretext for leaving any lands under the sway of such a determined pontiff.

It should be realized that Paolo Orsini had grown enormously fat. His legs were thicker than a normal man's body, and one of these massive limbs was infected with a disease called *la lupa*, the she wolf, named thus because it had to be fed with large amounts of fresh meat, which were applied to the infected area. Otherwise, the raging disease, not finding dead flesh to devour, would hurl itself upon the living flesh which surrounded it.

The prince hit on the excuse of this affliction to visit the famous baths at Abano, near Padua, a dependency of the Venetian Republic. He left with his new wife around the middle of June. Abano was a very safe place for him, because for many years the house of Orsini had been allied to the Venetian Republic through mutual services.

Once he arrived in this safe haven, the prince thought only of enjoying the delights of several sojourns, and, with this plan in mind, he rented three splendid palazzi, one in Venice, the Palazzo Dandoli, in the Rio della Zecca; the second, the Palazzo Foscari, in Padua, in the magnificent Piazza l'Arena; and a third, in Salò, on the beautiful shores of Lake Garda, in the palazzo that once belonged to the Sforza Pallavicini.

The Venetian nobles, who governed the Republic, were delighted to learn of the arrival in their land of such a great prince, and at once they offered him a generous contract as a condottiere – that is to say, a large annual sum, which was to be used by the prince to levy a body of two or three thousand mercenaries who would be under his command. The prince quickly declined the offer. He sent a reply to the senators saying that although by natural inclination and family tradition he felt deeply devoted to the Most Serene

Republic, nevertheless, as he was at present attached to the Catholic king, he did not think it proper to accept another engagement. Such a determined reply somewhat cooled the senators' enthusiasm. On his arrival in Venice they had originally intended in the name of the people to organize an elaborate reception. Following the prince's reply, they decided to let him make his appearance as a private individual.

On being informed of this, Prince Orsini decided not even to go to Venice. By then nearing Padua, he made a diversion into that beautiful countryside and appeared with his entire household at the house prepared for him on the shores of Lake Garda. He spent the whole summer there enjoying the most pleasant and varied pastimes.

The season to move on came round, and the prince undertook a few small excursions, following which he seemed less able than before to stand the strain. Fearing for his health, he considered spending a few days in Venice, but he was dissuaded from this by his wife Vittoria, who made him stay on in Salò.

Some people think that Vittoria Accoramboni was aware of the danger which daily surrounded the prince her husband and that she only persuaded him to stay in Salò because she intended later to leave Italy and take him, perhaps, to some free town in Switzerland. In this way, in the event of the prince's death, she would safeguard herself and her personal fortune.

Whether there was any truth in this hypothesis, the fact is that nothing of the sort took place, for on 10 November, afflicted by a new malady, the prince had a premonition of what was about to happen.

He took pity on his unfortunate wife. He foresaw her in the full bloom of youth as poor in reputation as in possessions, loathed by the reigning princes of Italy, little loved by the Orsini, and with no hope of another marriage after his death. A generous man, of loyal faith, he drew up a will by his own hand in which he tried to secure the property of the unfortunate lady. He bequeathed to her the sum of a hundred thousand scudi in money and jewels, and all the horses, carriages, and effects which he had used during the journey. The rest of his estate he left to Virginio Orsini, his only son by his first wife, the sister of Grand Duke Francesco I of Tuscany, whom he'd had killed with her brother's consent for unfaithfulness.

But even a man's best laid plans are never certain. The arrangements Paolo Orsini had thought would guarantee the poor young woman's complete security led her to ruin and destruction.

After signing his will on 12 November, the prince felt a little better. On the morning of the 13th he was bled, and the doctors, pinning their hopes on a strict diet, left clear orders that he eat nothing.

But they had barely left the room when the prince demanded that dinner be served him. No one dared disobey, and he ate and drank as usual. No sooner had he finished the meal than he lost consciousness and two hours before sunset he was dead.

After this sudden demise, accompanied by her brother Marcello and the dead prince's whole court, Vittoria Accoramboni left for Padua to the Palazzo Foscari, the palace that the prince had rented.

Shortly after her arrival she was joined by her brother Flaminio, who enjoyed the patronage of Cardinal Farnese. Vittoria began to undertake the necessary steps to obtain payment of the legacy that her husband had left her. This legacy amounted to sixty thousand scudi, which were to be paid to her over a period of two years. The sum was independent of her dowry, jointure, and all the jewels and furniture already in her possession. Prince Orsini had laid down in his will that in Rome, or in any other town of the duchess's choice, a palazzo should be purchased for her to the value of ten thousand scudi and a country house to the value of six thousand. He had also stipulated that her table and household should be equipped as befitted a woman of her rank. The household should consist of forty servants, with a corresponding number of horses.

Signora Vittoria placed considerable hopes on the help of the princes of Ferrara, Florence, and Urbino, and on that of cardinals Farnese and de' Medici, named executors of his will by the deceased prince. It should be noted that the will had been drawn up in Padua and submitted to the expertise of their excellencies Pensirolo and Marocchio, leading professors of that university and among the most famous jurists of the present day.

Prince Lodovico Orsini arrived in Padua to discharge his duties concerning the late duke and his widow and to proceed thence to the island of Corfu to take up the post of governor, to which he had been nominated by the Serene Republic.

The first problem to arise between Signora Vittoria and Prince Lodovico was over the late duke's horses, which the prince said did not belong properly speaking to the household effects, but the duchess managed to prove that they should be considered actual effects, and it was decided she should retain the use of them pending a further decision. As guarantor she named Signor Cavalier Soardi da Bergamo, condottiere of the Venetian nobility, a very rich man and among his country's leading figures.

The next difficulty concerned a certain quantity of silver plate, which the late duke had given back to Prince Lodovico as a pledge for a sum of money he had lent the duke. Everything was legally settled, for His Serenity, the Duke of Ferrara, did all he could to see that every one of Prince Orsini's legacies were carried out to the full.

This second matter was decided on 23 December, which was a Sunday. The following night, forty men entered the house of the aforesaid Signora Accoramboni. They were dressed in clothes of coarse linen cut in a bizarre way so that the intruders could not be recognized except by voice. When they spoke to each other they used nicknames.

First they sought the person of the duchess, and, when they found her, one of them said, 'Now you must die.'

Though she begged, he refused even to grant her a single second to commend her soul to God but instantly thrust his dagger beneath her left breast, and, moving the point about in all directions, the assassin several times asked the poor girl to tell him if he had touched her heart. At last she gave up the ghost. All this time, the others were searching for the duchess's brothers, one of whom, Marcello, was saved because they could not find him in the house. The other was stabbed a hundred times. The murderers left the corpses where they fell and the whole household weeping and wailing, and, snatching up the casket which contained the jewels and silver, they departed.

This news quickly reached the Signori Rettori, the magistrates, in Padua, who had the bodies identified and then notified the Venetian authorities.

All Monday, in the palace and at the Church of the Eremitani, people thronged to view the corpses. The curious were moved to compassion, particularly on seeing the duchess's beauty. They wept for her misfortune *et dentibus fremebant* – and gnashed their teeth – against the murderers. But no one yet knew their names.

The Curia was beginning to suspect that the act had been committed on the orders, or at least with the consent of, the aforesaid Prince Lodovico. They summoned him, and as he tried to enter the courtroom of the Most Illustrious Captain with a troop of forty armed men, they barred the door to him and told him he could come in with only three or four. But when these few entered, the others threw themselves in their wake, scattering the guards aside, and they all burst in.

Once before the Most Illustrious Captain, Prince Lodovico complained of the insult to him, alleging that they were treating him as no other sovereign prince had ever been treated. The Most Illustrious Captain asked him if he knew anything about Signora Vittoria's

death and what had happened the night before. Prince Lodovico replied yes, and that he had ordered that the matter be brought to law. The tribunal wanted to take down his testimony in writing. He answered that men of his rank were not subject to such a formality nor, equally, should they be interrogated.

Prince Lodovico asked permission to send a courier to Florence with a letter for Prince Virginio Orsini to inform him of the trial and of the crime which had been committed. He showed a letter, which was not the real one, and obtained what he asked for.

But the courier was stopped outside the town and carefully searched. They found the letter Prince Lodovico had shown and a second letter hidden in the man's boot. It ran like this:

To Signor Virginio Orsini
Most Illustrious Signore,

We have carried out what was agreed between us, and in such a way that we have fooled the Most Illustrious Tondini [apparently the name of the magistrate who had interrogated the prince] so thoroughly that I am here considered the finest man in the world. I did the deed myself, so do not fail to send immediately you know who.

This letter caused a sensation among the magistrates, who hastened to send it to Venice. At their command the town gates of Padua were closed and the walls arrayed with soldiers day and night. A notice was posted threatening with dire consequences anyone with knowledge of the assassins who did not tell what he knew to the police. Any of the murderers who could bring evidence against one of the others need not fear, for a sum of money would be paid to him. But at seven o'clock on Christmas Eve Aloise Bragadino arrived from Venice, with supreme powers from the senate and an order to have arrested dead or alive, at whatever cost, the above-mentioned Prince Lodovico and all his household.

The said Signor Advocate Bragadino, the Signor Capitano, and the Signor Podestà gathered in the fortress. The order was given, under threat of the gallows, to all foot soldiers and cavalry to arm themselves and surround the said Prince Lodovico's palazzo, which was beside the fortress and next to the church of San Agostino on the Arena.

When day broke – it was Christmas Day – an edict was published, exhorting the sons of San Marco to arm themselves and hasten to Prince Lodovico's palazzo. Those without weapons were summoned to the fortress, where they were given all the arms they needed. The edict promised a reward of two thousand ducats to whoever could bring before the tribunal, dead or alive, the said prince, and five hundred ducats for each of his followers. Furthermore, all unarmed men were forbidden to approach the prince's palazzo so as not to obstruct those who were fighting in case the prince decided to launch a sortie.

At the same time cannons and heavy artillery were set up on the old ramparts opposite the palazzo. An equal number were placed on the new ramparts, from which the back of the palazzo could be seen. On this side, the cavalry had been drawn up so that they could manoeuvre freely if necessary. On the river bank benches, wardrobes, carts, and other furniture had been piled to serve as a barricade. It was hoped by these means to hem in the besieged if they tried to march in closed ranks on the people. The barricades would also be used to protect the artillery and soldiers against the arquebuses of the besieged.

Lastly, boats were moored on the river opposite and to the sides of the prince's palazzo. These were crammed with men bearing muskets and other weapons that could harass the enemy if he attempted to break out. At the same time, all roads were barricaded.

While these preparations were under way, a letter expressed in very convincing terms arrived. In it, the prince complained of being judged guilty and of finding himself treated like an enemy, and even a rebel, before the matter had been brought to trial. This letter was composed by one Liverotto.

On the 27th, three of the town's dignitaries were sent by the magistrates to Prince Lodovico, who had forty men with him in his palazzo, all veteran soldiers experienced in the use of arms. The officials found these men busy loading their arquebuses and erecting barricades made of planks and wet mattresses.

These three gentlemen told the prince that the magistrates were resolved to lay hands on him. They begged him to give himself up, adding that by so doing before anything else happened he could expect some mercy from them. To which Don Lodovico replied that if the soldiers drawn up round the palazzo were removed he would give himself up to the magistrates together with two or three of his men and deal with the matter under the express condition that they would be free to go home.

The deputation took these proposals written in the prince's own hand and returned to the magistrates, who on the advice of the Most Illustrious Pio Erea in particular and of other nobles present, rejected the conditions.

The deputation went back to the prince and told him that if he did not give himself up, his palazzo would be demolished by cannon fire, to which he replied that he preferred death to submission.

The magistrates gave the battle signal; although they could have destroyed almost the whole house with one blast, they preferred at first to act with some caution to see if those under siege would agree to surrender.

This proved successful, and San Marco was spared a great deal of money which otherwise would have had to be spent on rebuilding the palazzo. All the same, agreement was not unanimous. If Lodovico's men had taken immediate action, without hesitation, and rushed out of the house the outcome would have been very uncertain. They were experienced soldiers. They did not lack weapons or ammunition or courage and, above all, it was greatly to their advantage to win. Looked at from the worst angle, it's bound to be better to die by gunshot than by the executioner's hand. Moreover, who were they fighting against? A feeble troop of besiegers with little experience in weapons, so that, had the prince's men acted thus, the signori would have repented of their clemency and natural goodness.

The besiegers began by bombarding the pillars on the palazzo's façade. Then, aiming higher and higher, they destroyed the wall behind the pillars. Meanwhile, those inside let off volley after volley of musket fire, but the only effect this had was to wound a local man in the shoulder.

'To arms! To arms!' Prince Lodovico cried out in a wild shout. 'To battle! To battle!' He was busy melting down pewter dishes and window leads to make bullets. He seemed poised for a breakout, but the besiegers turned to new measures and brought up their heaviest artillery.

With the first shot they demolished a huge chunk of the house, and a certain Pandolfo Leupratti da Camerino fell into the ruins. He was a brave man and a well-known outlaw. He had been banished from the Papal States, and a reward of four hundred scudi had been put on his head by the distinguished Signor Vitelli, for the death of Vincenzo Vitelli, who had been attacked in his carriage and killed by arquebus and dagger thrust dealt him by Prince Lodovico Orsini through the hands of the aforesaid Pandolfo and his accomplices. Winded by his fall, Pandolfo was unable to move. A servant of the Cai di Lista nobles advanced armed with a pistol. Boldly he cut off Pandolfo's head, which he quickly carried back to the fortress and turned over to the magistrates.

Shortly after, another section of the house was brought down by cannon fire, and at the same time Count Montemellino of Perugia fell with it. He died in the ruins, blown to pieces by the cannon ball.

At this point a certain Colonel Lorenzo, of the Camerino nobility, was seen emerging from the house. A very rich man who had given proof of his courage on several occasions, he was held in high regard by the prince. The colonel resolved not to die unrevenged. He tried to fire his gun, but although the chamber revolved, perhaps by God's intervention the arquebus did not fire, and at that moment his body was pierced by a bullet. The shot had been fired by a poor devil, an assistant teacher at San Michele school. And while to get the promised reward this man was running up to cut off the head, he was pre-empted by others quicker and stronger, who took the colonel's purse, sword belt, gun, money, rings, and the head.

When those in whom Prince Lodovico placed the greatest trust were dead, he was extremely distressed and seemed incapable of further action.

Signor Filenfi, the prince's chamberlain and secretary, wearing civilian clothes, signalled from the balcony with a white handkerchief that he was giving himself up. He came out and was taken to the fortress, frogmarched in the parlance of war, by Anselmo Suardo, lieutenant of the magistrates.

Questioned on the spot, Filenfi said none of what had happened was in any way his responsibility, because he had arrived in Venice on Christmas Eve and had been there for several days conducting business for the prince.

He was asked how many men the prince had. He replied, 'Twenty or thirty.' He was asked for their names and replied that there were eight or ten who, being men of rank, ate like him at the prince's table, and he knew their names. But the others, adventurers and vagabonds, had only been with the prince a short time and were not known to him.

He named thirty men, including Liverotto's brother. A little later the artillery, which was on the ramparts, began to fire. Soldiers took up positions in buildings adjoining the prince's palazzo to prevent his men from escaping. The prince, who had run the same risks as the two whose deaths we have described, told those who were with him to hold out until they saw a message in his own hand together with a certain signal. After this, he gave himself up to the Anselmo Suardo we have already mentioned. And since he could not make his way by carriage, as was prescribed, owing to the throngs of people at the street barricades, it was decided that he should proceed on foot.

Surrounded by Marcello Accoramboni's men, he walked with condottieri at his sides as well as with Lieutenant Suardo and other captains and townsmen, all of them well armed. Then came an armed troop of men and soldiers from the town. Prince Lodovico was dressed in brown, his stiletto at his side and his cloak flung over his arm in a debonair manner. With a disdainful smile, he remarked, 'If I had entered the fray', meaning that if he had he would have carried the day. Brought before the magistrates, he greeted them and said, indicating Signor Anselmo, 'Sirs, I am this gentleman's prisoner and I am very angry at what has happened, none of which was my fault.'

When the captain ordered the stiletto which hung at the prince's hip to be removed, Lodovico propped himself against a balustrade and began to clip his nails with a small pair of scissors he found there.

He was asked how many people he had in his house. He named, among others, Colonel Liverotto and Count Montemellino, whom we have mentioned previously, adding that he would give ten thousand scudi to buy back the life of the one, and for the other he would give his own blood. He asked to be put in a place appropriate to a man of his standing. When this was granted, he wrote to his men in his own hand, recommending them to surrender, and he gave his ring as a sign. He told Signor Anselmo that he was handing over to him his sword and gun, begging that when the weapons in his palazzo were found the signore would use them for love of the prince, since they were gentlemen's weapons and not those of a common soldier.

The soldiers entered the palazzo, searched it from top to bottom, and on the spot rounded up the prince's men, who were thirty-four in number. They were then led in pairs to the palazzo's prison. The dead were left to be scavenged by dogs, and everyone hastened to give an account of the affair to Venice.

It was noticed that many of Prince Lodovico's soldiers, accomplices after the fact, were missing. Edicts were issued forbidding anyone to harbour them under threat of having their houses demolished and all their goods confiscated. Anyone who denounced them would receive fifty scudi. In this way, several were captured.

A frigate has been sent from Venice to Crete, carrying an order to Signor Latino Orsini to come at once on a matter of the gravest urgency and it is thought that he will lose his position.

Yesterday morning, Santo Stefano's Day, everyone expected to see Prince Lodovico put to death or to hear that he had been strangled in prison. There was widespread surprise that this did not take place, considering that he was not a bird to remain long in a cage. But on the following night the trial took place, and on San Giovanni's Day, just before dawn, it was heard that the prince had been strangled and that he had died well prepared. His body was quickly taken to the cathedral, accompanied by the clergy of that church and by Jesuit priests, where it was displayed all day on a table in the centre of the church to serve as a spectacle for the populace and a mirror for the unwise.

The next day the body was taken to Venice, as the prince had stipulated in his will, and there he was buried.

On Saturday two of his men were hanged. The first and more important was Furio Savorgnano; the other, a person of low birth. On Monday, which was the last day but one of the year, thirteen men were hanged, many of them nobles. Two others, one called Captain Splendiano and the other Count Paganello, were led through the square and slowly torn with red-hot pincers. When they reached the place of execution they were bludgeoned, their heads smashed, and they were quartered while still almost alive. These men were nobles and before they had taken to crime they had been very rich. Count Paganello was said to be the assassin who had killed Signora Vittoria Accoramboni in the cruel way I have described.

To counter this, in his aforesaid letter Prince Lodovico swore that he himself had done the deed. Perhaps he had claimed this out of the same pride he showed in Rome when he had Vitelli assassinated or as a way of currying Prince Virginio Orsini's favour.

After he had received the death blow, Count Paganello was stabbed several times under the left breast in an attempt to touch his heart, as he had done to the poor lady. Owing to this, rivers of blood flowed from his breast. To the astonishment of all, he lived a further half hour. He was a man of forty-five who exhibited great strength.

Gallows have been erected to dispatch the remaining nineteen on the first day after the holiday. But as the executioner is very tired and the people in a frenzy from having witnessed so many deaths, the execution is postponed for two days. It is thought that none of the accused will be left alive. It is possible that the only exception amongst Prince Lodovico's men may be Signor Filenfi, his chamberlain, who is doing his utmost to establish that he had no part in the affair.

Not even the oldest citizens of Padua can remember an occasion when so many people were more justly put to death at the same time. The Venetian signori have acquired fame and a good reputation amongst the most civilized nations.

Added by another hand

Francesco Filelfi, secretary and chamberlain, was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. The cup-bearer (*copiere*) Onorio Adami da Fermo, along with two others, to one year in prison. Seven others were condemned to the galleys, with leg irons, and finally seven were released.

Molière's Don Juan is certainly a philanderer, but first and foremost he's a man of breeding. While he gives in to the irresistible urge that draws him to pretty women, above all he is set on conforming to a certain ideal. He wants to be the man most admired at the court of a witty, debonair young king.

Mozart's Don Giovanni is closer to nature and not so French. He is less concerned with what others think. In the words of d'Aubigné's Baron de Fœniste, he is not for ever worrying about 'appearances'. We have only two portraits of the Italian Don Juan as he must have looked in that beautiful country in the sixteenth century at the beginning of the Renaissance.

One of these two portraits I cannot discuss, for our century is too strait-laced. It's worth bearing in mind Lord Byron's great phrase, which I have often heard quoted – 'this age of cant'. Hypocrisy, which is so tiresome it takes in no one, has one huge merit in that it gives fools something to talk about. They are scandalized if one dares mention such-and-such, if one dares laugh at something else, etc. The drawback is that this greatly limits the field of history. If the reader has the good taste to allow me, I will give him in all humility an historical account of the second of these Don Juans, of whom, in 1837, one may speak. His name was Francesco Cenci.

For a Don Juan to exist, there must be hypocrisy. The Don Juan character is an effect whose cause has no root in the ancient world. Religion in those days was a celebration, urging men to pleasure. Why would it stigmatize anyone who made a particular pleasure his sole concern? The government advocated abstinence, but only forbade activities which could harm the country – that is to say, the obvious interests of all and not those which would harm the individual who indulged in them.

Therefore in Athens any man with a taste for women and with a lot of money could be a Don Juan. No one would have objected. No one would have claimed that this life was a vale of tears and that there was any good in suffering.

I do not think that an Athenian Don Juan could have descended into crime as rapidly as a Don Juan in the monarchies of today. A great part of the latter's pleasure consists in flouting convention, a taste that began in his youth when he thought he was merely defying hypocrisy.

To break the law in a monarchy like that of Louis XV, to open fire on a roofer and bring him toppling down from his rooftop – is that not proof that one rubs shoulders with the prince, that one is better bred, and that one doesn't give a damn for middle-class law? Is not to fly in the face of the law the first step, the first test, of every little would-be Don Juan?

Nowadays in France women are no longer in fashion, which is why French Don Juans are rare. Where they do exist they always start out by seeking the most natural of pleasures, while making a virtue of defying the religious convictions of their contemporaries, which seem to them meaningless. It is not until later, when he begins to become perverted, that our Don Juan finds exquisite pleasure in defying opinions that seem even to him both right and reasonable.

Such a progression must have been very difficult in classical Greece, and it is only under the Roman emperors after Tiberius and Capri that we find libertines who love depravity for its own sake – that is, for the pleasure of defying the reasonable beliefs of their contemporaries.

I therefore attribute the emergence of a satanically inspired Don Juan to the Christian religion. It was this religion that taught the world that the soul of a poor slave or a gladiator was equal to that of Caesar himself. So we must thank Christianity for the rise of delicate feelings. I am sure, however, that sooner or later such feelings would have made themselves felt in the hearts of the people. The Aeneid is considerably more tender than the Iliad.

Jesus' doctrine was the same as that of his contemporaries, the Arab philosophers. The only new element introduced into the world as a result of St Paul's preachings was a priesthood set completely apart from the rest of the people and even with opposing interests.

This body of priests concentrated its efforts on cultivating and strengthening religious fervour. They invented rituals and practices to stir the hearts of people of all classes, from the simple shepherd to the world-weary courtier. They were able to create a link between their preachings and the sweet impressions of early childhood. They did not allow the least epidemic or the greatest misfortune to pass by without using the calamity to increase fear and religious fervour or at least to build a fine church, such as the Salute, in Venice.

The existence of such a body of priests led to the much admired occasion when, without physical force, Pope St Leo resisted the terrible Attila and his barbarian hordes, who had just wreaked havoc in China, Persia, and Gaul.

Thus, as with that absolute power tempered by song known as the French monarchy, religion has brought about a great many wondrous things that the world would never have seen had it not produced these two institutions.

Among the many things both good and bad but always unusual and extraordinary that would have astonished Aristotle, Polybius, Augustus, and other distinguished men of the ancient world, I unhesitatingly place the wholly modern character of Don Juan. I consider this character a product of the ascetic institutions created by the popes who came after Luther, since Leo X and his court (1506) to some extent followed the precepts of Athenian religion.

Molière's *Don Juan* was first performed on 15 February 1665, at the beginning of Louis XIV's reign. This prince was not in the least devout; nevertheless, the ecclesiastical censors struck out the scene with the poor man in the forest. To attain power, the censors managed to persuade the exceptionally ignorant young king that the word Jansenist was synonymous with Republican.

The original Don Juan is by Tirso de Molina, a Spaniard. An Italian troupe produced an adaptation of it in Paris in about 1664, thereby provoking a stormy reaction. It is probably the most frequently staged comedy in the world. In it we find the devil, love, fear of hell, an exalted passion for a woman – all, that is, which is most sweet and most terrible in the eyes of every man above the savage state.

It is not surprising that the character of Don Juan was introduced into literature by a Spanish poet. Love plays a dominant role in the life of that people. In Spain love is a serious passion, one which demands sacrifices from all other passions including, believe it or not, vanity! It's the same in Germany and Italy. Only France, in fact, is completely free of this passion, which makes foreigners get up to

such folly – for instance, marrying a poor girl on the excuse that she is pretty or that you are in love with her. In France girls who are not pretty have no lack of suitors. We are a prudent people. Elsewhere plain girls are compelled to become nuns, and that is why convents are so indispensable in Spain. Girls do not have dowries in that country, and this law has maintained the ascendancy of love. In France, however, love has fled to the attics – that is, to the girls who do not marry with the intervention of a family solicitor.

We can leave out Lord Byron's Don Juan, for he is only a Faublas, a handsome, aimless young man upon whom all kinds of improbable delights are showered.

Therefore, it is in Italy, and in the sixteenth century, that this remarkable character must have made his first appearance. It is in Italy, and in the seventeenth century, that a princess partaking of an ice cream with extreme pleasure one evening after a very hot day said, 'What a pity this is not a sin.'

In my opinion this notion forms the basis of the Don Juan character, and, obviously, the Christian religion is necessary to it. At which point a Neapolitan writer cries, 'Is it nothing to defy the heavens and to believe at the same time that the heavens can reduce you to ash? Herein lies the extreme sensual pleasure of having a devout mistress, filled with piety, who is well aware that she is doing wrong and asks God's pardon as passionately as she sins.'

Let us consider a highly wilful Christian, a man born in Rome at the time when the stern Pius V had just reinstated or invented a mass of petty practices utterly alien to that natural morality that believes virtue only lies in that which is useful to mankind. An inexorable inquisition, so inexorable that it didn't last long in Italy and had to take itself off to Spain, has just been re-established and is instilling fear in everyone. For several years dire penalties were exacted for the non-observance or public contempt for such infinitesimal practices now elevated to the rank of sacred duty. Our character would have shrugged his shoulders on seeing everyone tremble in the face of the Inquisition's strict rules. 'Well,' he would have thought, 'I am the richest man in Rome, the capital of the world, and I shall also be the boldest. I shall make fools of all these respectable citizens who so little resemble anyone worthy of respect.' To be a Don Juan, a man must have courage and a quick, uncluttered mind that sees clearly into the motives behind a person's actions.

Francesco Cenci would have thought, 'How can I, a Roman, born in Rome in 1527 during those same six months when the Lutheran soldiers of the Bourbon high constable's court were committing the most appalling profanities upon the holiest places, bring my bravery to public attention and give myself, as profoundly as possible, the pleasure of flying in the face of public opinion? How can I shock my doltish contemporaries? How can I give myself that keen thrill of feeling different from the crowd?'

It would not enter the head of a Roman, and a medieval Roman at that, to restrict himself to these words. There is no country where bold words are held in more contempt than in Italy.

Francesco Cenci was a man who might have thought this way. On 15 September 1598 he was murdered as his daughter and wife looked on. Nothing pleasant has come down to us about this Don Juan. His character has been in no way softened or toned down by any desire on his part to be a well-bred man, like Molière's Don Juan. He never gave a thought to others except to impress them with his superiority, to make use of them to further his own ends, or to hate them. Our Don Juan takes no pleasure in compassion, in gentle dreams, or the illusions of a tender heart. His pleasures have to be conquests that can be seen by others and cannot be ignored. He needs the list which the insolent Leporello waves in front of poor Elvira's eyes.

Our Roman Don Juan would never have done anything so clumsy as to give away the key to his character or to confide in a lackey, like Molière's Don Juan. He never had a confidant and only spoke such words as were necessary to achieve his ends. No one ever saw him in those moments of real tenderness and delightful merriment that make us forgive Mozart's Don Juan. In a word, the portrait I am going to draw is appalling.

Personally I would not have chosen to portray this character. I would have been satisfied with merely studying him because he is satanic rather than intriguing. But I assure you I was begged to do so by my travelling companions, to whom I could refuse nothing. In 1823, I was lucky enough to see Italy in the company of some delightful people whom I shall never forget. I was deeply affected, as were they, by the exquisite portrait of Beatrice Cenci that we saw in Rome at the Palazzo Barberini.

The picture gallery of this palazzo has now been reduced to but seven or eight paintings, four of which are masterpieces. First, there is the portrait of the famous Fornarina, Raphael's mistress, by Raphael himself. This portrait, over whose authenticity there can be no doubt, for contemporary copies can be found, is quite different from the face in the Florentine gallery, which is said to be Raphael's portrait and has been engraved under his name by Morghen. The Florentine portrait itself is not even by Raphael. In courtesy to a great name, the reader will perhaps forgive this short digression.

The second precious portrait in the Barberini gallery is by Guido Reni. It is the portrait of Beatrice Cenci, many bad prints of which are in existence. The great painter has draped a light piece of material round Beatrice's neck and shoulders and bound her head in a turban. He was afraid of pushing realism to the point of gruesomeness by painting an exact picture of the costume she'd had made for her execution, with the dishevelled hair of a poor sixteen-year-old girl who has just given in to utter despair. The face is calm and lovely, the expression gentle, and the eyes very large. They have the startled look of a person who has been surprised as she wept hot tears. Her hair is fair and very beautiful. This face has none of the Roman arrogance and awareness of its own power that one often catches in the confident expression of a daughter of the Tiber, *di una figlia del Tevere*, as they proudly call themselves. Unfortunately the half-tones have turned to a brick-red over the two hundred and thirty-eight long years that separate us from the catastrophe which I am about to relate.

The third portrait in the Barberini gallery is that of Lucrezia Petroni, Beatrice's stepmother, who was executed with her. In her natural beauty and pride she looks the true Roman matron. Her features are imposing, and the flesh tints are of an astonishing whiteness; the eyebrows are black and strongly marked; the expression is haughty and at the same time full of voluptuousness. This contrasts beautifully with the gentle, candid, almost Germanic face of her stepdaughter.

The fourth portrait glows with rich lifelike colours. It is one of Titian's masterpieces, a Greek slave, the mistress of the famous Doge Barbarigo.

Almost all foreigners on arriving in Rome have themselves taken at once to the Barberini gallery. They are drawn, particularly the women, by the portraits of Beatrice Cenci and her stepmother. I shared the common curiosity. Then, like everyone else, I tried to gain access to certain parts of their famous trial. Anyone who has the influence to do so will be amazed, I think, on reading these accounts – which are all in Latin except for the replies of the accused – to find almost no explanation of the facts. The reason is that no one in Rome in 1599 was unacquainted with the facts. I bought permission to copy a contemporary account. I thought I could make a translation which would in no way offend propriety. At least this translation can be read aloud to French ladies in 1823. It is well understood that a translator ceases to be faithful when he no longer can be, since horror would quickly prevail over simple curiosity.

The sad role of the genuine Don Juan – he who seeks to conform to no model and who only considers the opinion of others in order to shock – is revealed here in all its horror. His outrageous crimes force two unhappy women to have him killed before their very eyes. These two are his wife and daughter, and the reader will not dare to decide whether they were guilty. Their contemporaries felt they should not have died.

I am convinced that the tragedy of Galeotto Manfredi (who was killed by his wife, a subject treated by the great poet Monti), and many other domestic tragedies of the sixteenth century, which are less well known and scarcely mentioned in local histories of various Italian towns, ended with a scene similar to that in La Petrella castle. Here is my translation of a contemporary account. It is in Roman Italian and was set down on 14 September 1599.

II

A TRUE ACCOUNT

of the deaths of Giacomo Cenci, Beatrice Cenci, and Lucrezia Petroni Cenci, their stepmother, executed for the crime of patricide last Saturday, 11 September 1599, during the reign of the Holy Father Pope Clement VIII, Aldobrandini.

The monstrous life which Roman-born Francesco Cenci, one of our richest fellow citizens, has always led has finally brought about his destruction. He has carried off to an early death his sons, strong, brave young men, and his daughter Beatrice. Although barely sixteen when sent to her death four days ago, she was nevertheless considered one of the most beautiful women in the Papal States and in all Italy. News is spreading that Signor Guido Reni, a pupil of the famous Bologna school, wished to paint a portrait of poor Beatrice last Friday – the very eve, that is, of the execution. If this great artist has carried out the task as successfully as the other paintings he has produced in the capital, posterity will have some idea of this remarkable girl's beauty. So that posterity should also retain some memory of her unparalleled misfortunes, and of the astonishing fortitude with which this truly Roman soul withstood them, I have decided to record what I have learned of the events which led up to her death and what I saw on the day of her glorious tragedy.

The people who gave me my information occupied positions that allowed them access to the most secret details of the case, which to this day are not generally known in Rome, although for the past six weeks people have talked of nothing but the Cenci trial. I am going to write with considerable freedom, as I am assured that I will be able to lodge my account in respectable archives, from which it will only be removed after my lifetime. My only regret is to have to impugn (but the truth will out) the innocence of poor Beatrice Cenci, who was as loved and respected by all who knew her as her vile father was loathed and execrated.

This man, who was undeniably endowed by heaven with extraordinary shrewdness and caprice, was the son of Monsignor Cenci, who was promoted to the position of treasurer – that is, minister of finance – under Pius V, Ghislieri. That saintly pope who was, as we know, preoccupied with a justified hatred of heresy and the re-establishment of his excellent Inquisition, had nothing but contempt for the temporal administration of his State. It was thus that Monsignor Cenci, who was treasurer for several years before 1572, found the means to leave to the appalling man who was his son and the father of Beatrice, a net income of a hundred and sixty thousand scudi.

In addition to this huge fortune, Francesco Cenci had a reputation for courage and shrewdness which, in his youth, no other Roman could match. This reputation stood him in such good stead at the Papal Court and amongst the people as a whole, that the crimes which were beginning to be attributed to him were only of the type which the world readily forgives. Many Romans also remembered with bitter regret the freedom of thought and action which they had enjoyed in the time of Leo X, who was taken from us in 1513, and under Paul III, who died in 1549. During the reign of this latter pope, young Francesco Cenci's name began to be linked with certain unusual love affairs pursued in ways that were even more unusual.

In the reign of Paul III, a period when there was still some freedom of speech, many people said that Francesco Cenci was particularly obsessed with strange activities which might give him *peripezie di nuova idea*, new and disturbing sensations. These suppositions were based on entries found in his account books, such as this one: 'For the exploits and *peripezie* at Toscanello, three thousand five hundred scudi, *e non fu caro* – and it was not expensive.'

In other Italian towns it is perhaps not realized that in Rome our fate and our way of life change according to the character of the reigning pope. Thus for thirteen years, under good Pope Gregory XIII, Buoncompagni, anything was permitted in Rome. If a man wanted to have an enemy stabbed, he would not be prosecuted so long as he went about it in a discreet manner. This excess of leniency was followed by an excess of severity over the five-year reign of the great Sixtus V. It has been said of him, as was said of the Emperor Augustus, that either he should never have come to the throne or else he should have stayed there for ever. At that time we witnessed executions of unfortunate wretches for assassinations or poisonings forgotten for ten years, which the perpetrators had had the ill luck to confess to Cardinal Montalto, now Sixtus V.

It was chiefly in the reign of Gregory XIII that Francesco Cenci's affairs became the subject of widespread discussion. He had married a very rich woman, as suited a man of his standing, who died after giving him seven children. Shortly after her death he took as a second wife one Lucrezia Petroni, a woman of unusual beauty, admired for the dazzling whiteness of her complexion but a little too plump, a defect common amongst Roman women. He had no children by Lucrezia.

The least of the vices imputed to Francesco Cenci was a predilection for perverted love affairs; the greatest was that of not believing in God. Throughout his entire life he was never seen to enter a church.

Thrown into prison thrice for these perverted affairs, he managed to get himself released by giving two hundred thousand scudi to individuals enjoying the patronage of the twelve popes who succeeded each other during Cenci's lifetime.

Francesco Cenci already had greying hair when I met him. This was during the reign of Pope Buoncompagni, when a man could get away with anything he dared to do. Cenci was about five feet four inches tall, well built, although somewhat thin. He was considered extremely strong, a rumour he may have spread himself. He had large expressive eyes, though the upper lids drooped a little too much. His nose was too large and prominent. His lips were thin and his smile gracious. This smile could become terrible when he glared at his enemies. If he were in the least upset or irritated he would tremble so wildly that he could scarcely control himself. As a young man I saw him riding from Rome to Naples, doubtless for one of his little amorous adventures. He was going through the San Germano and Faggiola woods, quite unconcerned about brigands, and he made the journey, it was said, in fewer than twenty hours. He always travelled alone without letting anyone know beforehand. When his first horse tired, he bought or stole another. If anyone put the slightest obstacle in his path, nothing would prevent Cenci from stabbing that person with his dagger. Indeed, it is true to say that when I was a young man – that is, when he was forty-eight or fifty – no one was bold enough to stand up to him. His main delight lay in defying his enemies.

He was well known along the highways and byways of the Papal States. He paid generously but he was also quite capable of sending hired assassins to murder anyone who offended him, even two or three months after the offence had been committed.

During the whole of his long life, his only virtuous deed was to build a church dedicated to San Tommaso in the courtyard of his huge palazzo near the Tiber. Yet he was driven to this by the extraordinary desire to have beneath his eyes the tombs of all his children, for whom he had an immense and unnatural hatred, even during their tenderest years, when they could not have offended him in any way.

‘That’s where I want to put them all,’ he often said with a bitter laugh to the workmen he employed to build his church. He sent the three eldest, Giacomo, Cristoforo, and Rocco, to study at the University of Salamanca, in Spain. Once they arrived in that far-off land, he took an evil delight in dispatching them no allowances, so that the unfortunate young men, after writing numerous letters to him, all of which remained unanswered, were reduced to the bleak necessity of borrowing small sums of money or of begging at the roadside.

Back in Rome they found a father who was harsher, more severe and angrier than ever, and who despite his vast wealth would neither clothe them nor give them money enough to buy the cheapest food. The unfortunate youths were obliged to appeal to the pope, who forced Francesco Cenci to grant them a small allowance. With this pittance, they cut themselves off from him.

Soon afterwards, as a result of his perverted love affairs, Francesco was imprisoned for the third and last time, at which juncture his three sons begged an audience with the Holy Father, the pope now in office, and together besought him to have their father put to death for, as they said, having dishonoured their family. Clement VIII greatly wished to do so, but he refused to obey his first instinct, not wanting to satisfy such unnatural children, and he sent them in shame from his presence.

As we noted earlier, their father got himself out of prison by giving a large sum of money to anyone who would aid him. We must assume that the extreme step taken by his three eldest sons only served to increase further the hatred that he bore towards his children. He cursed them at every turn, both the elder and the little ones, and every day he rained blows with his stick upon his two poor daughters, who lived with him in his palazzo.

The elder girl, although closely watched, went to the enormous lengths of arranging for a plea to be presented to the pope, in which she entreated His Holiness to marry her off or to place her in a convent. Clement VIII took pity on her distress and married her to Carlo Gabrielli of the noble family of Gubbio. His Holiness forced her father to give her a handsome dowry.

At this unexpected blow, Francesco Cenci went into a raging passion, and to prevent his younger daughter Beatrice from any idea of following her sister’s example when she grew older, he confined her to one of the apartments in his huge palazzo. There no one was allowed to see Beatrice, then scarcely fourteen years old and already in the full flower of a ravishing beauty. She had, moreover, a gaiety, a simplicity, and a lively wit that I have seen in no one else. Francesco Cenci himself brought food to her. It is thought that it was then that this monster fell in love with her, or pretended to fall in love with her, so as to torment his wretched daughter. He often spoke to her of the treachery of her elder sister, and, working himself into a fury by his own words, ended by raining blows upon Beatrice.

Meanwhile, Rocco Cenci, his son, was killed by a pork butcher, and the following year Cristoforo Cenci was killed by Paolo Corso, of Massa. On this occasion their father revealed his godlessness, for he refused to pay as much as a single *baiocco* for the candles. On hearing of the fate of his son Cristoforo, he cried out that he would never have a moment’s happiness until all his children were buried and as soon as the last one died he would set his palazzo on fire as a sign of his joy. Rome was astounded by all this but could believe anything of a man who made a virtue of defying the whole world and the pope himself.

Nor did any of this satisfy him. With threats and by force he tried to violate his own daughter Beatrice, who was now grown up and a beauty. Shamelessly, he placed himself in her bed, completely naked. He strolled with her through the halls of his palazzo, he himself still quite naked. Then he led her to his wife’s bed, so that by the lamplight poor Lucrezia could see what he did to Beatrice.

He gave the poor girl to believe such a fearful heresy that I scarcely dare relate it. He said that when a father lay with his own daughter, the children which were born would automatically become saints and that all the greatest saints most revered by the church were born in this way – that is to say, that their maternal grandfather was their father.

When Beatrice resisted his infamous lust he beat her cruelly, until the poor girl, unable to sustain so miserable a life, decided to follow her sister’s example. She wrote a detailed petition to the Holy Father, but it is believed that Francesco Cenci must have taken precautions because this petition apparently never reached the hands of His Holiness. At any rate, it was impossible to find the document in the office of the Memoriali, when Beatrice was in prison and her lawyer urgently needed it. The document might have provided evidence of the outrageous excesses which were committed in the castle of La Petrella. Was it not clear to everyone that Beatrice Cenci had a legitimate defence? That daybook also mentioned the name of Lucrezia, Beatrice’s stepmother.

Francesco Cenci learned of his daughter’s plan, and we can imagine the fury with which he redoubled his ill-treatment of these two wretched women.

Their lives became absolutely unbearable, and it was then that, realizing they could hope for nothing from the justice of the sovereign, whose courtiers had been won over by Francesco’s rich gifts, they conceived the idea which brought about their downfall. It did, however, have the one advantage of putting an end to their suffering in this world.

We should understand that the renowned Monsignor Guerra often frequented the Palazzo Cenci. A tall, exceptionally good-looking man, he was endowed with a singular ability to do with a special grace anything he set his mind to. It was thought that he was in love with Beatrice and intended to give up the cloth and marry her, but, although he took great pains to hide his feelings, he was detested by Francesco Cenci, who accused him of having been in league with all his children. When Monsignor Guerra learned that Signor Cenci was away, he went up to the ladies’ apartments and spent several hours chatting with them, listening to their grievances and to their tale of the unbelievable treatment to which both had been subjected. Apparently it was Beatrice who first dared voice aloud to Monsignor Guerra the plan upon which they had decided.

In the course of time he made a pact with them and, strongly urged several times by Beatrice, he finally agreed to communicate their proposal to Giacomo Cenci, without whose consent nothing could be done, as he was the eldest brother and head of the house after Francesco.

It was not difficult for them to draw Giacomo into their conspiracy. He had been very badly treated by his father, who gave him no help, an extremely sore point with Giacomo, who was married and had six children. Monsignor Guerra’s apartments were chosen as the place where they would meet to discuss the best way to kill Francesco Cenci. The affair was arranged in the most seemly fashion, and the stepmother’s and the young girl’s votes were taken at every step. When they finally decided what to do, they chose two of Francesco’s vassals, who nursed a deadly hatred towards him. One of them was called Marzio. He was a good-hearted man, strongly attached to Francesco’s unhappy children, and, to please them, he agreed to take part in the patricide. Olimpio, the second man, had

been appointed warden of the fortress of La Petrella, in the Kingdom of Naples, by Prince Colonna, but Francesco Cenci had used his powerful influence with the prince to oust Olimpio.

Everything was arranged with the two men. Francesco Cenci had announced that to escape the unhealthy climate of Rome, he would spend the following summer at La Petrella, and so the assassins decided to call on a dozen Neapolitan brigands. Olimpio took on the job of recruiting them. It was decided that they would hide in the forest around La Petrella, where they would be informed of the moment Francesco Cenci set off from Rome. They would then seize him as he passed on the road and announce to his family that he would be released upon payment of a substantial ransom. The children would then have to return to Rome to collect the sum demanded by the brigands. They would pretend to be unable to raise the money quickly, and the brigands, seeing no sign of the money and true to their threats, would put Francesco Cenci to death. In this way no one would suspect the true authors of the murder.

But when summer came and Francesco Cenci left Rome for La Petrella, the spy who was to have given warning of his departure was late in informing the bandits in the forest, which gave them no time to get down to the highway. Cenci reached La Petrella unharmed. The brigands, tired of waiting for so uncertain a prey, went off to steal elsewhere on their own account.

Cenci, for his part, crafty old man that he was, never ran the risk of leaving his fortress. His bad temper increasing with the infirmities of old age, which were unbearable to him, he redoubled the atrocious treatment that he forced the two poor women to undergo. He claimed they were taking delight in his weakness.

At the end of her tether from the horrible things which she had to suffer, Beatrice summoned Marzio and Olimpio to come to the foot of the fortress walls. During the night, while her father slept, she spoke to them through a low window and threw them letters addressed to Monsignor Guerra.

By means of these letters it was arranged that Monsignor Guerra would promise Marzio and Olimpio a thousand scudi if they would take on the job of killing Francesco Cenci. A third of the sum would be paid by Monsignor Guerra in Rome before the deed, and the remaining two-thirds by Lucrezia and Beatrice when, after the deed was done, they were mistresses of the Cenci coffers.

It was further agreed that the act would take place on the day of the Madonna's nativity, and with this in view the two men were stealthily let into the fortress. But Lucrezia was restrained by the reverence due to the Feast of the Madonna, and she persuaded Beatrice to change the day so as not to commit a double sin.

Thus it was on 9 September 1598, in the evening, that the mother and daughter managed with considerable skill to administer opium to Francesco Cenci, a man who was so difficult to trick. At which he fell into a deep slumber.

Towards midnight Beatrice let Marzio and Olimpio into the fortress. Then Lucrezia took them to the room where the old man lay sound asleep. There they were left to perform what had been agreed, while the women waited in a nearby room. Suddenly they observed the two men emerge, pale-faced and distraught.

'What's happened?' asked the women.

'It seemed base and despicable to kill a poor old man in his sleep. We took pity on him and couldn't do it.'

At this excuse, Beatrice was filled with indignation and began to berate them, saying, 'Call yourselves men? You haven't the courage to kill a sleeping man. How would you face him if he were awake? You dare do this and then take money for it? Well, since your cowardice forces me, I'll kill my father myself. And as for you two, you won't live long.'

Emboldened by these stormy words and fearing some loss in the agreed payment, Marzio and Olimpio returned to the room, followed by the women. One of the hired killers had a large nail, which he placed vertically over the sleeping man's eye and then the other, who had a hammer, drove the nail into the victim's head. They then drove another nail into his throat, at which the poor soul, burdened with so many recent sins, was whisked off to hell. The body thrashed about, but in vain.

The deed done, the young girl gave Olimpio a large purse full of silver. She gave Marzio a cloak of gold brocade, which had belonged to her father, and then she sent them away.

Left alone, the women first withdrew the large nail from the corpse's head and then the one from the neck. They wrapped the body in a bed sheet and dragged it through a series of rooms to a gallery that looked out onto a small disused garden. From there, they threw the body onto an elderberry tree which grew in that desolate spot. As there were some privies at the far end of this gallery, they hoped that when the old man's body was found the next day, caught in the tree's branches, everyone would think that on his way to the privy his foot had slipped and he had fallen.

Events turned out exactly as had been anticipated. In the morning, when the body was found, an uproar arose in the castle. The women made haste to scream and moan and bewail the death of a father and husband. But filled with the recklessness of insulted modesty, young Beatrice lacked the prudence necessary for survival. Early that morning she had given the woman who washed the castle's linen a blood-drenched sheet, telling her not to be surprised at such large stains because she had been bleeding heavily all night. Thus, for the moment, all was well.

Francesco Cenci was given an honourable burial, and the women returned to Rome to enjoy the peace for which they had yearned so long in vain. They felt happier than they had ever been, for they had no idea of what was happening in Naples.

Divine justice would not let so heinous a patricide go unpunished, and it moved in such a way that, as soon as the events in the castle of La Petrella became known in Rome, the chief justice became suspicious and sent a royal commissioner to look at the body and have the suspected persons arrested.

The commissioner had everyone who lived in the castle detained. They were all taken to Naples in chains. Nothing in their depositions would have aroused suspicion had it not been for the washerwoman, who told how she had received from Beatrice a sheet, or sheets, covered in blood. She was asked whether Beatrice had tried to explain the large stains. She replied that Beatrice had mentioned a natural indisposition. She was asked if such large stains could result from such an indisposition. She replied that they could not, that the blood stains were of too bright a red.

This information was sent on the spot to the authorities in Rome. Nevertheless, several months went by before anyone there dreamed of having Francesco Cenci's children arrested. Lucrezia, Beatrice, and Giacomo could have saved themselves a thousand times, either by going to Florence under the pretext of making a pilgrimage or by embarking from Civitavecchia. But God kept this inspired idea from them.

On learning of what had happened in Naples, Monsignor Guerra instantly sent out some men with orders to kill Marzio and Olimpio. But they were only able to kill Olimpio, in Terni. The Neapolitan officials had arrested Marzio and taken him to Naples, where at once he admitted everything.

This fateful deposition was immediately dispatched to the Roman courts, which finally decided to have Giacomo and Bernardo Cenci arrested and sent to the prison of Corte Savella, and with them Lucrezia, the widow. Beatrice was kept under guard in her

father's palazzo by a large corps of secret police. Marzio was taken to Naples and he too was put into Savella prison. There he was confronted by the two women, who categorically denied everything, and Beatrice in particular refused to recognize the brocaded cloak she had given to Marzio. Smitten with admiration for the outstanding beauty and astonishing eloquence with which the young girl replied to the prosecutor, Marzio denied everything he had admitted in Naples. Interrogated, he said nothing and chose to die under torture, a fitting homage to Beatrice's beauty.

After his death, as the facts of the killing had in no way been established, the prosecutor could not find sufficient evidence to put either of Cenci's sons or the two women to the torture. All four were taken to the Castel Sant' Angelo, where they spent four very peaceful months.

The case seemed over, and no one in Rome doubted that the beautiful, brave girl who had inspired such lively interest, would soon be freed, when, as ill luck would have it, some officers of the law arrested the brigand who had killed Olimpio at Terni. Brought to Rome, the man confessed everything. Compromised by the brigand's confession, Monsignor Guerra was summoned to appear at once before the court. Imprisonment was certain, death quite probable. But this estimable man, endowed by fortune with remarkable resourcefulness, managed to escape in a manner little short of a miracle. He was considered the most outstanding man at the Papal Court, and he was too well known in Rome to hope to save himself. Moreover, the city gates were well guarded, and his house was watched, probably from the minute the summons had been delivered. The Monsignor was very tall, with a light complexion, a handsome blond beard, and a fine head of hair of the same colour.

In the blink of an eye, he seized a charcoal-seller, took his clothes, shaved off his own hair and beard, dyed his face, bought two donkeys, and set off to wander the streets of Rome, limping and selling charcoal. With great skill he made himself look coarse and dull and he went around crying his wares, his mouth full of bread and onions, while hundreds of secret police searched for him not only in Rome but along all the highways. Eventually, when his new face was well known to most of the secret police, he ventured to leave Rome, still driving his two charcoal-laden donkeys before him. He came across several groups of police, who made no attempt to stop him. Since then, only a single letter has been received from him. His mother sent money to him to Marseilles, and it is assumed that he is fighting as a mercenary in France.

The Terni assassin's confession and Monsignor Guerra's flight, which produced a great sensation in Rome, revived suspicions and strengthened the evidence against the Cenci family so that they were removed from the Castel Sant' Angelo and taken back to Savella prison.

When put to the torture, the two brothers fell far short of matching the nobility of the brigand Marzio. They were so weak as to confess everything. Signora Lucrezia Petroni, used to the softness and ease of a life of luxury, could not bear the idea of interrogation by being strung up. She revealed all she knew.

But it was quite different with Beatrice Cenci, a young girl who was full of spirit and courage. Neither Judge Moscati's kind words or threats swayed her. She bore the torture of the rope with perfect equanimity and bravery. The judge could not elicit a single reply that would compromise her in any way. Furthermore, by her unflinching manner, she completely baffled our celebrated Ulysse Moscati, who was the prosecutor in charge of the interrogation. He was so surprised at the young girl's comportment that he thought he ought to give a full account to His Holiness, Pope Clement VIII, now fortunately in office.

His Holiness wished to see and study the reports of the trial. He feared lest Judge Moscati, well known for his deep knowledge and superior wisdom, had succumbed to Beatrice's beauty and had spared her during the interrogation. His Holiness therefore transferred the conduct of the trial to a harsher judge. Indeed, this barbarian was ruthless enough to put her beautiful body mercilessly *ad torturam capillorum* – that is to say, that they questioned Beatrice while hanging her by her hair.

The new interrogator had her strung up by the rope and then confronted with her stepmother and brothers. As soon as Giacomo and Signora Lucrezia laid eyes on her, they cried out, 'The crime has been committed. You must repent and not allow your body to be torn apart by your pointless obstinacy.'

'Would you bring shame upon our house then,' replied the girl, 'and die in dishonour? You are very wrong, but if that is what you wish, so be it.'

Turning to the police, she said, 'Untie me and read me my mother's confession. I will admit what should be admitted and I will deny what should be denied.'

This was done. Beatrice confessed all that was true. Immediately the chains were removed from all four and, because she had not seen her brothers for five months, she wished to dine with them, and they all spent a pleasant day together.

But on the following morning they were again separated. The two brothers were sent to Tordinona prison, and the women remained in Savella. When the Holy Father saw the full report containing the confessions of all four, he commanded that they should at once be tied to the tails of wild horses and thus put to death.

All Rome trembled upon learning of this fearful sentence. Many cardinals and princes went to kneel before the pope, begging him to allow the accused to present their defence.

'Did they give their aged father time to present his?' replied the pope indignantly.

At last, as a special favour, he agreed to grant a stay of execution of twenty-five days. At once the leading Roman lawyers set themselves to write about the case, which had so troubled the town and filled it with compassion. On the twenty-fifth day they all appeared together before His Holiness. Nicolò De Angelis spoke first, but scarcely had he read two lines of his defence when Clement VIII interrupted him.

'What,' cried the pope, 'there are men in Rome who would kill their father and then there are lawyers to defend them?'

No one spoke until Farinacci dared open his mouth.

'Most Holy Father,' said he, 'we are not here to defend the crime but to prove, if we can, that one or several of the accused are innocent.'

The pope signalled to him to continue, and Farinacci spoke for three long hours, after which the pope took all of their statements and sent the lawyers away. As they left, Altieri was last in line. Afraid of compromising himself, he fell on his knees and said to the pope, 'I could do no less than appear in this case, since I am the advocate of the poor.'

To which the pope replied, 'We are not surprised at you but at the others.'

The pope did not retire to bed but spent the night reading the lawyers' pleas, assisted in this task by Cardinal di San Marcello. His Holiness seemed so moved that many began to hold out hope for the lives of the accused. To save Giacomo and Bernardo, the lawyers had placed the whole blame on Beatrice. Since it had been proved during the trial that her father had often used force on her in his

criminal intents, the lawyers hoped that she would be pardoned for the murder, as she had a legitimate self-defence. Thus, if she, the main author of the crime, were allowed to live, how could her brothers, who had been persuaded by her, be sentenced to death?

After a night given over to his duties as judge, Clement VIII ordered that the accused be taken back to prison and put in solitary confinement. This new turn of events caused great hopes throughout Rome, where Beatrice was the focus of attention of the whole case. It was said that she had been in love with Monsignor Guerra but had never compromised her virtue in the least degree. Therefore, in the name of justice, such a monstrous crime could not be imputed to her, for this would be to punish her for using her right to defend herself. What would have happened to her if she had consented to her father's advances? Should human justice increase the misery of such a gentle creature, one so deserving of pity and yet so ill used? After so grim a life, during which every sort of mistreatment had been heaped on her before she was even sixteen years old, did she not have the right to some less appalling days? All Rome seemed ranged in her defence. Would she not have been pardoned had she stabbed Francesco Cenci the first time he had attempted his crime?

Pope Clement VIII was kind and merciful. We began to hope that, slightly ashamed of the outburst with which he had interrupted the lawyers' pleas, he would pardon those who had used force to repel force, admittedly, not on the occasion of the first crime but when it had been attempted again. Rome was in a state of high excitement when the pope received news of the violent death of the Marchesa Constanza Santa Croce. Her son, Paolo Croce, had just murdered his sixty-year-old mother by stabbing her repeatedly with a dagger when she would not agree to his inheriting all her possessions. The report went on to say that Santa Croce had fled and that there was no hope of catching him. Recalling the recent Massini fratricide and distressed by the frequency of these murders of close relatives, the pope found himself unable to grant a pardon. He received the fatal news of Santa Croce on 6 September at the palace of Monte Cavallo, where he was staying so as to be near the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli, in which the following day he was to consecrate a German cardinal as bishop.

At four o'clock on the Friday afternoon the pope summoned Ferrante Taverna, governor of Rome, and spoke to him thus: 'We are turning the Cenci affair over to you, so that justice may be done by your efforts and as quickly as possible.'

The governor returned to his palace greatly troubled by the command he had just received. Hastening to carry out the death sentence at once, he called a meeting to decide upon the method of execution.

On the Saturday morning, 11 September 1599, the leading nobility of Rome, members of the fraternity of the *confortatori*, gathered at the prisons of Corte Savella, where Beatrice and her stepmother were confined, and Tordinona, where Giacomo and Bernardo Cenci were held.

The Roman nobles, who knew what was going on, spent all Friday night into the small hours rushing between the palaces of Monte Cavallo and those of the chief cardinals to try and establish at least that the women should be put to death inside the prison and not on a shameful scaffold and that young Bernardo Cenci, who, at just fifteen, could hardly have been involved in the plot, should be acquitted.

The noble Cardinal Sforza particularly distinguished himself by his zeal on that fateful night, but although a powerful prince he could achieve nothing. Santa Croce's crime was vile, committed as it had been for the sake of money, whereas Beatrice's crime was committed to save her honour.

While these powerful cardinals made vain efforts, Farinacci, our great legal expert, took the risky step of going straight to the pope. Once in the presence of His Holiness, this astonishing man used his skills to appeal to the pope's conscience, and at last, by the strength of his pleas, he wrested Bernardo Cenci's life.

It must have been four o'clock in the morning of Saturday, 11 September, when the pope issued the announcement. All night work had been going on in the square before the bridge of Castel Sant' Angelo in preparation for the cruel tragedy. However, not all the necessary copies of the death sentence were ready until five a.m., so it was six o'clock before the grim news could be announced to the hapless victims, who were sleeping peacefully.

At first, the young girl could not even summon the strength to dress herself. With piercing shrieks she gave in to utter despair.

'Oh God, how is it possible that I must die so suddenly?'

Lucrezia Petroni said nothing but what was seemly. First she prayed on her knees, then she calmly urged her daughter to accompany her to the chapel, so that the two of them might prepare for the great journey from life to death.

These words calmed Beatrice. The moment her stepmother recalled this great soul to her senses, her extravagant transports of despair gave way to complete serenity and composure. From that moment the girl became a mirror of steadfastness that all Rome admired.

She asked for a notary to make her will, and this was granted. She stipulated that her body be buried in San Pietro in Montorio. She left three hundred thousand scudi to the sisters of the Order of the Stigmata of St Francis. This sum was to endow fifty poor girls. Her example so moved Signora Lucrezia that she too made her will and ordered that her body be taken to San Giorgio. She left five hundred thousand scudi in alms to this church and made other pious legacies.

At eight o'clock they made their confession, heard Mass, and received holy communion. But before attending Mass, Signora Beatrice decided that it would not be seemly to appear on the scaffold, before the eyes of the whole populace, in the rich clothes they were wearing. She ordered two dresses, one for herself, the other for her mother. These were to be like nuns' habits, unadorned at breast and shoulder but simply gathered and with wide sleeves. The stepmother's dress was to be made of black calico, and the young girl's of blue taffeta with a long girdle for the waist.

When the dresses were brought, Signora Beatrice, who was on her knees, arose and said to Signora Lucrezia, 'My lady mother, the hour of our Calvary has arrived. We should prepare ourselves. Let us take these clothes and for the last time assist each other to dress.'

A large scaffold had been erected in the square before the Castel Sant' Angelo bridge, with a block and the executioner's axe. At eight o'clock that morning the Company of Misericordia brought its great crucifix to the prison door. Giacomo Cenci came out first.

On the threshold of the prison gates he knelt devoutly and kissed the Holy Wounds of the crucifix. He was followed by Bernardo Cenci, his young brother, who also had his hands bound behind his back and a wooden blindfold over his eyes. The crowd was huge, and there was pandemonium because of a pot of plants that fell out of a window almost on the head of one of the penitents who stood beside the banner with a lighted brand.

All eyes were fixed on the two brothers, when suddenly the Procurator Fiscal of Rome came forward and said, 'Signor Bernardo, Our Lord has granted you your life. Submit to accompany your kin and pray to God for them.'

At the same moment the boy's two *confortatori* took off the little board that covered his eyes. The executioner arranged Giacomo Cenci in the cart and removed his shirt in order to tear his flesh with red-hot pincers. When the executioner came to Bernardo, he verified the signature of the pardon, untied him, removed his manacles, and, as he was shirtless for the flesh tearing, the executioner

placed him on the cart and wrapped him in a cloak of gold brocade. (It was said to be the same cloak given to Marzio by Beatrice after the events in the castle of La Petrella.) The immense crowd, which thronged the road and peered from the windows and rooftops, gave out a great gasp. A hushed murmuring sound was heard as the rumour went forth that the child had been pardoned.

The chanting of psalms began, and the procession moved slowly off through Piazza Navona towards Savella prison. When it arrived at the prison gates the standard halted, the two women came out, made their obeisance to the foot of the Holy Cross and then set out walking, one behind the other. They were dressed as I have described, their heads covered with long taffeta veils that reached to their girdles.

Signora Lucrezia, being a widow, wore a black veil and black velvet slippers without heels, according to custom. The young girl's veil was of blue taffeta, like her dress. She also wore a long cloak of silver brocade that fell from her shoulders, a violet skirt, and white velvet slippers elegantly laced with crimson cords. Dressed thus, she walked with superb grace, and tears rose to everyone's eyes as they watched her coming slowly along in the last rows of the procession.

The hands of both women were free, although their arms were bound to their bodies, so that each could carry a crucifix. These they held firmly before their eyes. The sleeves of their dresses were very wide and their arms could be seen tightly covered to the wrist, as is the fashion in this country.

Signora Lucrezia, who was less resolute, wept continually, while young Beatrice showed great courage. Each time the procession passed a church, she turned her head and genuflected for an instant, saying in a steady voice, '*Adoramus te, Christe.*'

All this time poor Giacomo Cenci was being torn with pincers on the cart, and he too showed great courage.

The procession could barely cross the end of the square in front of the bridge of Castel Sant' Angelo so great were the number of carriages and the throng of people. The women were led straight into the chapel which had been prepared for them, and Giacomo was taken in after them.

Young Bernardo, covered by the brocaded cloak, was led directly to the scaffold, so that everyone thought he had not been pardoned and was to die. So overcome by fear was the poor child that he fainted at the second step he took up the scaffold. He was revived with cold water and made to sit opposite the executioner's axe.

The executioner went to fetch Lucrezia Petroni. Her hands were now bound behind her back, the veil was no longer over her shoulders. She appeared in the square accompanied by the banner, her head swathed in the black taffeta veil. There she made her peace with God and kissed His Holy Wounds. She was told to leave her slippers on the pavement. When she stood on the scaffold and the black taffeta veil was removed, she was humiliated at being seen with breast and shoulders exposed. She looked down at herself, then at the axe, and gave a slight shrug of resignation. Tears came to her eyes, and she said, 'Oh God, and you my brethren, pray for my soul.'

Not knowing what she had to do, she asked Alessandro, the first executioner, how she should position herself. He told her to sit astride the beam of the executioner's block. But this movement seemed to offend her modesty, and it took her a long time to manage it. The following description is acceptable to the Italian public, who insist upon knowing every last detail. The modesty of this lady was such that she injured her breast. The executioner showed the head to the people and then wrapped it in the black taffeta veil.

While the axe was being prepared for the young girl, a scaffolding loaded with onlookers collapsed, and a number of people were killed. Thus they appeared in God's presence before Beatrice.

When Beatrice saw the banner return to the chapel to fetch her, she asked animatedly, 'Is Madam my mother dead?'

They told her she was. Beatrice fell to her knees before the crucifix and prayed fervently for her mother's soul. Then she spoke aloud and at length to the crucifix.

'Lord God, Thou returnest for me and willingly I follow Thee, not despairing of Thy mercy for my great sin', etc.

She then recited several psalms and prayers in praise of God. When at last the executioner stood before her, with a rope, she said, 'Bind this body, which must be punished, and free this soul, which shall go forth to immortality and eternal glory.'

She then rose, said a prayer, left her slippers at the foot of the steps, and climbed up onto the scaffold. Nimbly she threw her leg over the beam, placed her neck where the axe would fall, and arranged herself perfectly on her own so as to avoid being touched by the executioner. So swiftly did she move that she prevented her shoulders and breast from being exposed to the public when the taffeta veil was removed. The stroke was a long time in coming because there was a delay. All this time she called aloud the name of Jesus Christ and the Most Holy Virgin.

The body jerked violently at the moment of death. Poor Bernardo Cenci, who was still seated on the scaffold, fainted once again, and it took his *confortatori* a half-hour to revive him. Then Giacomo Cenci appeared on the scaffold. Here we must pass over the hideous details. Giacomo Cenci was bludgeoned to death.

Bernardo was at once taken back to prison. He had a high fever, and they bled him. As for the unfortunate women, each was laid out in a coffin and set down a little way from the scaffold by the statue of St Paul, which is the first on the right-hand side of the bridge of Sant' Angelo. They remained there until a quarter past four in the afternoon. Around each bier burned four candles of white wax.

Then, with the remains of Giacomo Cenci, they were taken to the palazzo of the consul of Florence. At a quarter past nine in the evening, the body of the young girl, clothed once more in her own garments and crowned with a wreath of flowers, was carried to San Pietro in Montorio. She looked ravishingly beautiful and seemed to be asleep. She was buried before the high altar and the *Transfiguration* by Raphael of Urbino. Her body was accompanied by fifty great lighted candles and all the Franciscan monks and nuns in Rome.

Lucrezia Petroni was taken at ten o'clock in the evening to the church of San Giorgio. During this tragic drama the crowd was enormous. As far as the eye could see, the streets were full of carriages and people. Scaffolding, windows, and roofs were crowded with onlookers. The sun was so hot that day that many people fainted. Large numbers fell into a fever, and, by the time all was over at a quarter to two and the crowd dispersed, many had been suffocated, others trampled by horses. The number of dead was considerable.

Signora Lucrezia Petroni was rather short than tall, and though fifty years old she was still well formed. She had fine features, a small nose, black eyes, and a pale face with a luminous complexion. She had wispy chestnut hair.

Beatrice Cenci, who was to inspire eternal compassion, was just sixteen years old. She was small and curvaceous, with a pretty face and dimples in her cheeks, so that when dead and crowned with flowers one would have said she was asleep and even that she was laughing, as she often did when alive. She had a small mouth, fair hair, and natural curls. As she went to her death, her fair curls fell over her eyes, which, adding a certain poignancy, aroused compassion.

Giacomo Cenci was small and plump, with a pale face and black beard. He was nearly twenty-six when he died. Bernardo Cenci looked exactly like his sister, and, since he wore his hair long as she did, when he appeared on the scaffold many took him for his

sister.

The sun was so hot that a number of the spectators died in the night, amongst them Ubaldino Ubaldini, a young man of unusual beauty, who had previously enjoyed perfect health. He was the brother of Signor Renzi, a well-known Roman. Thus the shades of the Cenci departed in good company.

Yesterday, Tuesday, 14 September, on the occasion of the feast of the Holy Cross, the penitents of San Marcello made use of their privilege to free Signor Bernardo Cenci from prison. He had to pay, within a year, four hundred thousand scudi to the Most Holy Trinity of Ponte Sisto.

Added by another hand

The present-day Francesco and Bernardo Cenci are the descendants of the aforesaid Bernardo Cenci.

The noted Farinacci, who, by his doggedness, saved the life of young Cenci, has published his defence pleas. He gives only one extract from plea no. 66, which he delivered to Clement VIII on behalf of the Cenci family. This defence, which is in Latin, would take up six long pages and it is to my deep regret that I cannot include it here, as it shows how people thought in 1599 and is full of good sense. Many years after 1599, Farinacci, when sending his defence speeches to the printers, added this note to what he had said on behalf of the Cenci: *Omnes fuerunt ultimo supplicio effecti, excepto Bernardo qui ad triremes cum bonorum confiscatione condemnatus fuit, ac etiam ad interessendum aliorum morti prout interfuit.*² The end of this Latin note is touching, but I suppose the reader is tired of so long a tale.